

On: *The Woods* by Sleater-Kinney

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I. THE ALLEGORY.

If Sleater-Kinney was a golf player, they'd be Tiger Woods.

By all historical evidence, Woods should not have made it to the pinnacle of talent within his sport, a game with an indisputable history of racism.

Tiger Woods, regrettably for us, cannot lyrically describe the history of his sport and his personal symbolic achievements within it using a swing of his driver as a pen. Music fans, as opposed to golf fans, can feel lucky that their heroes and heroines have a certain privilege of public self-identification that sports players do not.

Sleater-Kinney, a rock band from the American Pacific Northwest, have done what Tiger Woods cannot. With their latest and seventh album (*The Woods*, released almost exactly one year ago), Sleater-Kinney have used words and sounds to summarize the history of rock and roll while at the same time placing themselves at

the very forefront of innovation in modern music.

Most American music publications recognized the greatness of *The Woods* by the end of 2005, but largely for the wrong reasons. They talk about the very unusual style of production, the drastic change in the Sleater-Kinney's sound, or the individual musicianship of the band members. What most don't seem to realize is that *The Woods* is of utmost importance within the ongoing narrative of rock and roll. That is to say, *The Woods* means much more than just a well-made rock record. It is a signal, a truly revolutionary step forward for the genre. It's like when Watson and Crick diagrammed the DNA strand; after their discovery, all other scientists could look at the model and say, "Oh! So *that's* how it is. Ok, then," and carry on with their work. *The Woods* is a thesis, the result of passion, research, and above all time, which gives anyone who will listen a new vantage point, at a far greater height, from which to view all rock music.

II. HISTORY: RIOT GRRL AND GRUNGE

There are a few key pieces of background information that must be considered when trying to see the effect of Sleater-Kinney's seventh album on the state of rock. The first is the identity of the band; they were at one time, and will never cease to be, riot grrls. Or anyway that's what we're lead to believe...Riot grrl was one of the most obvious examples of media-homicide in the history of American rock. They were born from a movement in the late 1990's that ran alongside grunge, a genre which bred their now-best-friends Pearl Jam.

Riot grrl (sic) was nothing but a sub sect of punk rock; only one that was explicitly feminist, and therefore included women. Female punk rock fans (specifically in the Northwest and Washington, D.C.) were tired of being harassed and assaulted at rock shows, and started to make their opinions known through their own fast, scream-y, jittery punk songs. The most famous "Riot grrl" bands would probably be Bratmobile and Bikini Kill, out of Olympia, Washington (both signed to that town's Kill Rock Stars record label - the label Sleater-Kinney was on for almost 10 years).

Olympia's K Records signed many other bands that embodied the ethos of homemade, lowbrow, anti-sexist punk rock (most famously the two-person band Beat Happening), but the values of the Northwest were also alive and well in Washington, D.C. (most notably with the feminist, albeit male, punk group Fugazi, on the influential label Dischord).

From the beginning, riot grrls made what could be considered a "big deal" about the fact that they were women.¹ Most of the general rock community saw them as "moody" (read: PMS-y) girls, overreacting as usual. Riot grrl was the victim of unfortunate timing, as well; at the same time Bikini Kill was at their peak of influence and releasing their first real record (*Bikini Kill EP*, 1991), a little band called Nirvana released a record called *Nevermind* that would change the way the rest of the country viewed our Pacific Northwest music scene forever.

Not surprisingly, Bikini Kill moved to Washington, D.C. shortly after that, and clear split between grunge and riot grrl can be observed over this time. Grunge and riot grrl were two parallel movements (although with radically different politics; inasmuch as grunge lacked any), that started in the same bars and clubs but subsequently took completely different paths.² Bratmobile, Pearl Jam, Bikini Kill and Nirvana were all around at the same time, and the "girl bands" were often asked by the "boy bands" to open up their shows. The admiration seems to be genuine; Kurt Cobain was quoted numerous times in praise of riot grrl bands, and clearly Eddie Vedder retains a soft spot, as well.

But then the American media got involved, and everything started swirling into the toilet bowl. The riot grrls were made into mockeries of 1970's bra-burners³, and their music was written off as so screechy that it was unlistenable. The interesting thing though, when you really listen, is that Nirvana songs could be Bikini Kill songs

¹ It should be noted here that part of Kathleen Hanna's message was specifically anti-rape; a survivor of some serious sexual assault herself, Hanna was particularly disgusted by the sexism and blatant violence towards women she experienced in the punk scene.

² Many believe that Kurt Cobain got the idea for "Smells Like Teen Spirit" when Kathleen Hanna was in his apartment in Seattle and she spray painted "Kurt smells like Teen Spirit" on the wall, a joke about his (lack of) deodorant. From her graffiti, he extrapolated a single that is held up as the classic expression of postindustrial, American young-adult angst. The song made about a billion dollars, but we all know what happened to Kurt.

³ A media stereotype that *itself* was in fact a fabricated mockery of real civil-rights women in the '70's - none of whom actually burned their bras. Never happened.

sung by a man. The screech of a male scream has never seemed to bother music critics (see: Little Richard, Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant), but the scream of a woman in music has always sent the critics, and the masses, running for the exits. So "grunge" was exalted on high, and by 1993 all riot grrls were caught trying desperately to break the tiny mold that our unenlightened media had crammed them into. The riot grrls didn't quit (almost all of them are still making music or art of some kind), they just stopped wanting to be called "riot grrls;" they have since moved on.

III. HISTORY 2: COCK ROCK

Rock music has a celebrated, romanticized, and well-known history. It all started in New Orleans with rythm and blues, then rockabilly in Memphis; there was motown in Detroit and then psychedelia in San Francisco. Most applicable to our cause was the roots of heavy metal, which were Frank Zappa in the States and Led Zeppelin, then Black Sabbath in the UK. And now, in the new millennium, rock continues (although it has been proclaimed "dead" many, many times).

What is missing from this portrait of rock? In a word, women. Women have been statistically absent from rock and roll in almost every aspect (with the sometime-exception of Motown) from its inception. But unlike science, where one also finds across-the-board gender disparity, there is something inherent in "rock and roll" as we have come to understand it that keeps women out. A test tube or a Bunsen burner doesn't discriminate based on gender, but there is something about the dominant accepted definition of "true" rock which makes female participation virtually impossible.

That "thing" is perhaps most aptly described by a term created in 1978 by rock writers Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, in their article entitled "Rock and Sexuality." In addition to two or three newer books, this is one of a very small selection of critical literature that really analyzes the intersections of rock music and gender. When describing the music created by swaggering, long-haired and ultra-confident rockers that have been around since the 1970's, Frith and McRobbie use the term "cock rock";

rock which is inspired, executed, and adored, by cocks (penises) everywhere. Many girls enjoy cock rock, too, but those who do almost never use the term. They vehemently deny the influence of gender on their favorite kind of music. But cock rock is not meant (at least by this writer) as a necessarily derogative term. Just as something that is wholly feminine is not therefore bad, recognizing that a form is predominantly defined by masculinity is not condemning it. However, when confronted with the sheer mathematical *absence* of women in rock, I do think it's reasonable to be a little suspicious of the structures that have, up until now, held up the Gods of rock and roll.

IV. THE CRITICS

Rock music made by women has never been identified properly. It is always termed *girl* rock or, even worse, *chick* rock. Just as a writer with a few extra grams of melanin in her skin will always be viewed as a "black writer", women rock musicians find it nearly impossible to be evaluated in the same terms as men. Sexism within music criticism is often evident in what's *not* written; if gender is not mentioned in an article about rock, one can assume the musicians are men (just as unstated race is almost always white). Unfortunately for those forward-thinking individuals among us, the fact that rock music is, at the very least, an uneven playing field for women is apparently unworthy of much popular frustration or analysis.

The fact that the women of Sleater-Kinney were, at one time, "riot grrls" is copiously documented and held up as a kind of disclaimer, or handicap, against them in most articles featuring the band. They will never *not* be a "riot grrl band" (even though their sound now is far more like The Who than like Bratmobile...) On the other hand, the reason riot grrl was pushed into existence (violent exclusion of women from punk) is virtually unrecognized. The reverent, almost pious, idol-worship of bands like Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, or AC/DC only continues to grow in influence; there is a consistent, uncomplicated trend of canonizing of the "rock gods" that continues to evidence itself in most modern rock. The epic influence of a band like the Rolling Stones has been extremely well documented in a purely historical, largely trivial sense. One can

find hundreds of biographies of the Beatles, Jimmy Page, or Jimi Hendrix. In the “Rock Literature” section of a bookstore, you’ll find encyclopedic “history of rock” tomes, biographies of the aforementioned gods or of particularly sexy orhard-living women (Billie Holliday, the occasional Janis Joplin). If you search for “women” you will find scores of “women in rock” books, where feminist writers go back through the history and try to highlight women who were unnoticed at the time (or, the editors of Rolling Stone try to redeem themselves with the same tactic). That, or they write about one of two subjects: Lilith Fair (which has little to do with rock and roll) and riot grrl. From my experience, both these subjects are critical, and musical, dead-ends.

V. THE RECORD.

*"So you want to be entertained? / Please look away
We're not here 'cause we want to entertain / Please go away (don't go away)
Reality is the new fiction they say / Truth is truer these days / Truth is
man-made
If you're here 'cause you want to be entertained / Please go away
And if your art is done / Johnny get your gun
Join the rank and file / On your TV dial
You come around looking 1984 / You're such a bore, 1984
Nostalgia, you're using it like a whore...
You did nothing new with 1972
Where's the 'fuck you'? / Where's the black and blue? ...
All you want is entertainment / Rip / me / open / it's free ...
1, 2, 3! If you wanna take a shot at me, get in line ...
1, 2, 3! We can drown in mediocrity, it feels sublime
1, 2, 3! It feels like someone pushed rewind ...
Don't drag me down, I'm not falling down
The grip of fear is already here,
The lines are drawn, whose side are you on?"
-Sleater-Kinney, "Entertain"*

The Woods is a fantastic, complicated, epic, but above all literate, rock album; it was easily one of the top three of 2005. It sounds like nothing before it, even though most listeners think there is something wrong with their speakers upon first listen.

There is nothing wrong with the speakers, but perhaps there should be a disclaimer on the CD cover that the album was recorded in an brand-new, intentionally different manner. It sounds fuzzy, like the amps were turned up too loud. At first it's distracting, one wants to clean up the sound and hear it the way we think it is meant to be heard. But we would be wrong, and suspension of disbelief is important to maintain while listening.

For the listener, what follows is a brief track-by-track summary of *The Woods*.

Track #1, "The Fox." The first sound is just one off-beat's worth of feedback; it's the producer (Dave Friedman, a totally new addition for them) letting you know that something is not quite right with this record. And the first real beat, the "one" (of "one, two, one, two", a 2/4 time signature), is a fuzzy, over-amplified guitar chord. The only way I can think to narrate that first sound (which comes up over and over again on the record) is something like "...BBLAAOW!" The ellipsis is the anticipation that always precedes it, the "Blaow!" is the wall of fireworks-quality noise/sound that they use to sing their lyrics over. It's not, at first go, what would be considered a classically *beautiful sound*. It's more like being slapped in the face.

Track #2, "Wilderness." I still don't particularly like the first half of this song, it kind of feels like filler. But I always feel rewarded by the second half, where that trademark "BLAow!" sound comes back and there is a happily exultant finish to the song. We notice by now the vocabulary of sounds that S-K is going to use on this album; the most important one being feedback. You can always judge a rock song on the "hardness" scale by totaling up the amount of feedback allowed into the recording. On *The Woods*, the feedback is played like a third guitar, milked and bent and layered into this new sound they have created out of the fundamentals of classic heavy metal.⁴

Track #3, "What's Mine Is Yours." (Their thesis.)

*"Did you ever get the feeling / That you don't belong
Said the teacher in the classroom / I think there's something wrong
But your desks are too heavy / And your walls are too white
Your rules are all wrong / And it's either run or fight
But I'm still running...I'm still running..."*

⁴ There are many defining characteristics for what makes "heavy metal", but the definitions are as easy to come by as opinions on the Beatles, and I simply cannot wade through them all. Suffice it to say, heavy rock is that which uses very loud plugged-in guitars, heavy and dominant drumming, and usually includes at least one easily identifiable "climax" by the end of a song.

This is my personal favorite track. Knowing what I know, when they sing those last two lines, I can't help but feel overwhelmed with pride (for our capacity as Americans to rock, intelligently). This is a turning point for the album; it can be read as the band saying "Ok, here's how we do everything that's been done before in *our* way, but now we want to take all that stuff and make something totally new out of it." Starting at exactly 3:07, the song breaks down and Carrie does a very classic guitar solo, then there's the section of lyrics quoted above. After that, after they've declared that they are aware of all the utter shit they are confronted with as progressive women in rock, and decide to stick close to innovative music as a guide and just "keep running", keep trying; after all that comes the "BBLLAAOW!!" again, and we forget how hard it was to get here and just twitch our muscles in time to the bass and the drums.

Track #4, "Jumpers." (A.K.A.: "The Letterman Song", or "Janet Makes Her Presence Known.") After listening to this song, one realizes: Janet Weiss has *got* to be one of the most exciting drummers out there today. As I am not a percussionist, I have no idea how to explain the technical reasons why, but her drumming makes my bones move involuntarily. It's like she's splitting up time into all these increments I didn't even know about, and then putting them back together them into some kind of mathematically intricate, thousand-layered quilt. (Which is really a beautiful quilt.)

The problem this song has is the only substantive one on the album; too many climaxes. The third fifth (if the song were divided into five) of "Jumpers" is essentially one long climax, lasting almost a minute. For a song that's not even five minutes long, sixty seconds worth of climax may simply be too much. Like pizza, money, or sex; one can, indeed, have too much of a good thing.

Track #5, "Modern Girl" (Girl with an "I"). This song is probably the wussiest song Sleater-Kinney has ever recorded; it's far too pretty and optimistic for many fans like myself. But, even in the first melodic, major-chord verse, you can hear little hisses and whirrs in between 'proper' sounds that let you know something is slightly askew. The last line is most telling; it is repeated over and over by Carrie Brownstein (not the

⁵ Sleater-Kinney performed on the David Letterman Show on June 27, 2005. Other than Letterman introducing them as "*The Sleater-Kinney*," the show was a success.

usual vocalist; this song is remarkable if only for the fact that she is clearly trying to expand her horizons, to great success). "*My whole life / Was like a picture of a sunny day...*" (repeated two or three times); it's sung with emphasis on the "whole" and the "life", and when she sings, Carrie shakes her head a little like she's saying "no" while still pounding away at her guitar. This line could be glossed any number of ways, but the combination of image and choice of grammatical tense makes it, I would think, a widely relatable message.

Track #6, Entertain. ("The Single.") Lyrics to this song have already been quoted, and it's really a fleshing-out of the message presented in "What's Mine is Yours." At halfway through, this is the most punk, the most polemical song on the record. A perfect phrase to describe the experience of seeing this song performed live would be something like, "Fuck you, Let's Go!!" The first time they say "*Don't bring me down/ I'm not falling down*", followed by a series of gut-shaking "BLLAOW's!!" ...is quite moving. Still gives me goose bumps.

Track #7, "Rollercoaster" (In which Sleater-Kinney shows they have a sense of humor.) A common myth about feminists is that we are utterly humorless, and spend all our time fuming and plotting terrorist acts against patriarchy. All one needs do is listen to "Rollercoaster," and know that Sleater-Kinney are feminists, to know that the myth is not true. As suggested by the title, "Rollercoaster" is about fun, experimentation and the fantastic *grooove* you can only achieve with decade-long bandmates that you're also best friends with. That said, "Rollercoaster" is probably the weakest track. Even the band is laughing, audibly, at the end of the recording...not a good sign.

Track #8, "Steep Air." This is the toughest nut to crack on the album; it seems sad and a little estranged, and the rhythm is hard to keep track of (although Janet, of course has no problem with that). But, with lyrics like "*I'm tired of waiting on a ship that won't leave shore...I'm tired of waiting on a plane that don't have wings...*" it still seems like a moving and relatable song. The best moment comes right around the 3:00 mark, with the venerable Corin Tucker assuming her rightful place as lead singer (she has one of those voices that cuts right through your sternum, but only if you let it; as

I've said before, the scream of a woman makes most people cover their ears). Her words are layered with heavy reverb, but not enough to make them unintelligible; and by the end of the verse we come back to the "BLAOW!" sound, and some exhilarating lyrics. The last verse:

*"I booked my ticket / Packed my bags
My flight is leaving / And our time has passed
I'm tired of knocking on a door that just won't budge
Locked out of the engine I'm just a wheel that you have spun*

(BLAAAOW!!)

But who's to say I don't have wings / But who's to say I don't have wings..."

Tracks #9, "Let's Call It Love" and #10, "Night Light." In recording sessions for *The Woods*, Sleater-Kinney would often find themselves "jamming out" after the bulk of "Let's Call It Love". One day they realized that "Night Light" is in the same key, so the two tracks were recorded as one continuous take. As such, it really only makes sense to listen to them in succession (when one of the songs comes up on random, it just doesn't sound right without the other).

For a punk band (which Sleater-Kinney started out as), four minutes is a long song. Thirty seconds would be considered a "short" song. "Let's Call It Love" is exactly eleven minutes and one second long, an unprecedented length for this band (perhaps any band on the Sub Pop record label). This can be seen as the final shrugging off of the yoke of expectation; no one would ever guess for Sleater-Kinney to make an eleven minute song. But the song itself, the lyrics, are concentrated in the first half, and the second is just Carrie, Corin and Janet showing what they can do. A friend once labeled all jam bands "masturbatory" to me in high school, and that seems a pretty apt adjective. But that doesn't mean "Let's Call It Love" is not a joy to behold; the rhythms are classic rock, militaristic, death-metal-like, and pure Sleater-Kinney. I challenge anyone with even a modest interest in rock music to have a beer or two and see a performance of "Let's Call It Love" and *not* be totally and completely "with them" at the end.

"Night Light" is the epilogue to this record; it sounds the most like a Sleater-Kinney song we could have heard on one of their previous albums. At that point, I'm

usually just so overjoyed and enraptured that it always sounds good to me. I especially love their trademark double-guitar sound that resurfaces in this song; the novel style of production makes it new, however, and not a second of it sounds derivative.

VI. CONCLUSION.

The Woods is, depending on how you look at it, a polemical thesis paper, a model of a DNA strand, the swoosh of a golfer's driver, and a recording of some music. Just as Woodstock is a town in New York and a culturally iconic moment in history, Sleater Kinney's new record is many things at the same time.

I have had the privilege of seeing this band perform three times, twice after this record was released. The third occasion was, seemingly, Divine Intervention on the part of yours truly...I flew home from college last October to Madison, Wisconsin for the weekend to celebrate my mother's birthday. I saw that Sleater-Kinney was performing the next night in my humble Midwestern hometown, and it was easy to get a ticket. The show was, of course, heart-stoppingly good, and even more so because I felt that a whole new demographic of fans was getting their first S-K exposure with the new, more accessible record.

After the show, a friend-of-a-friend was giving his (inevitable) complaints about the performance. He thought the guitars were "too cocky." I didn't say anything, just smiled and flushed with pride...I didn't want to say anything anyway; my ears were still ringing and I didn't yet want to replace the sound of revolution, as embodied by the band's performance of "What's Mine Is Yours," out of my head just yet. My invective would have fallen on deaf ears, anyway.

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One Beat (2002) - Kill Rock Stars

The Woods (2005) - Sub Pop Records



(L-R: CARRIE BROWNSTEIN, JANET WEISS, CORIN TUCKER)